

ARTICLE APPEARED
 ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
 6 September 1983

President Says Spy Jet Landed Before Downing

By RICHARD HALLORAN
 Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 5 — President Reagan said tonight that a United States reconnaissance plane passed close to a Korean passenger plane early last Thursday but landed in Alaska an hour before the Korean plane was shot down.

Earlier, in a statement read by a senior Administration official that supplemented the President's remarks in his televised address to the nation, the White House said the presence of the reconnaissance plane "some 1,000 miles and two and a half hours' flight time from the scene of the shootdown in no way excuses or explains this act, which speaks for itself."

The issue of the Air Force RC-135 surveillance plane arose Sunday when a senior Soviet military officer, Col. Gen. Semyon F. Romanov, chief of staff of the air defense forces, said in Moscow that a Soviet pilot might have confused the airliner with the reconnaissance plane.

Based on Tiny Island

United States military officials said the RC-135, whose mission was to gather information on Soviet missiles, was based on the tiny island of Shemya, toward the tip of the Aleutian chain. That would explain how it was back on the ground when the attack took place.

In a related development, an aide to the Senate majority leader, Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, said the Senator was certain the Russians knew which plane they were tracking as they had assigned different numbers to each

plane for tracking and knew each was headed in a different direction.

Senator Baker attended a White House session Sunday in which Congressional leaders were briefed on details of the episode and listened to tapes of transmissions between Soviet commanders on the ground and the Soviet pilot who reportedly shot down the passenger plane. He was said to have received additional information later.

Meanwhile, American military officers here said the crew of the RC-135 that flew near the Korean plane was unaware the Soviet Union was preparing to attack the civilian plane.

The officers said that so far as had been determined, the reconnaissance crew had heard neither radio transmissions from Soviet ground stations to the fighter pilot who reportedly shot down the Korean plane nor conversations between the Korean pilot and a Japanese ground station.

The RC-135, which was loaded with electronic monitoring devices, passed west of Korean Air Lines Flight 7 early Thursday morning as the reconnaissance plane flew in a northerly direction to listen and tape Soviet communications about missiles. The White House said "both aircraft were then in international airspace, and the U.S. aircraft never entered Soviet airspace."

The White House added: "The closest point of approach of the two aircraft was approximately 75 nautical miles, while the U.S. aircraft was in its mission orbit. Later, the U.S. aircraft crossed the path taken by the Korean airliner, but by then was almost 300 miles away."

Military officers said the Air Force plane would routinely have "painted," or registered with radar, the Korean plane as a matter of aerial safety. It could not be determined if the reconnaissance plane spotted Russian fighters on its radar.

In any event, the officers said, Air Force planes on such missions rarely listen in on commercial airline radio frequencies. In addition, the reconnaissance plane's listening devices would be tuned to missile communications and not to air defense transmissions.

Rarely Understand Russian

The officers also said the technicians who operate the listening and monitoring devices rarely understand Russian. The technicians tape the information then deliver it to intelligence analysts in Alaska to study.

In its statement, the White House said that "as the Korean airliner strayed off course and overflew the Kamchatka Peninsula, it was initially identified by the Soviets as an RC-135 and then as an unidentified aircraft."

But, the statement said, the Soviet air defense radar operators and fighter pilots tracked the Korean plane for two and a half hours, with the fighter pilots in visual contact. The statement said the "aircraft pilots whose voices are on the tape obtained by the U.S. and played for the Congressional leadership never refer to the Korean aircraft as an RC-135, only as 'the target.'"

"They made no serious effort to identify the aircraft or to warn it," the White House continued. "They did not appear to care what it was. Instead, they were intent on killing it. If the Soviets made a mistake in identification, which stretches the imagination, they have not said so to date."

The RC-135 is part of a fleet operated by the Strategic Air Command to seek information on Soviet missile deployments, communications and test shots. The plane, with a crew of about 17, has devices that can monitor radio, radar and missile telemetry.